

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

How to write a successful funding application

Applying for funding is something that almost all voluntary and small organisations need to do. However, writing a successful funding application is like a good recipe – it depends on a few ingredients coming together well. Finding the right funder, filling out the application properly and providing all information required are the three key ingredients to a successful bid.

Many funding applications are unsuccessful not because the funding body does not like the idea, but because the application is incorrectly completed, documents requested are missing, or it simply does not meet the stated criteria. Proper research and preparation will eliminate the possibility of this happening, ensure that your time is not being wasted and increase your chances for grant success.

This briefing will cover what you will need to do to research, collate and prepare information about your project in order to communicate clearly with your funder. It will also show you how to complete an application form and write a letter of application.

Preparation Step I: Your Project

The title

Unfortunately, most funders do not fund ongoing running costs, preferring to put their money into specific 'projects', (i.e., an activity within a specific time frame, with a set purpose and can demonstrate one or more outcomes). To enable not only your stakeholders but also your funders to know instantly what your project is about, choose a title for your project that is clear and self-explanatory (e.g. Computers for Kids).

Be realistic

The best projects are usually small but have a direct, measurable impact which can be considered a success. The most important things are that you are

addressing a proven need and that your aims and objectives are clear and realistic. A project that is achievable, useful and focussed will show funders that it has been well-planned and organised.

Stay focused

Make sure you maintain sight of your project plan and your original aims, as this will increase your chances of success. Be sure you and your colleagues remain clear about your goals, especially:

- why is your project important? and,
- how will you specifically use the money to achieve your aims?

Designate someone to co-ordinate the project and ensure that everyone knows who this is.

Also:

- make sure you and your colleagues are clear about who is co-ordinating the project and the funding applications;
- if certain tasks need to be delegated, be certain this is done before the planning process gets underway, as this could slow things down and waste time.

Benefits

Remember that funders are more interested in who will benefit from your project than the needs of your group or organisation. Demonstrating these benefits is vital, and can be done in a variety of ways, the best being:

- **Statistics** – use surveys, census, council records or any statistics in your area to help prove your project is needed. Statistics greatly help funding claims when presented properly with a good application.
- **Be specific** – avoid vague statements and be as specific as possible about why your project is needed at this time.
- **Explain** – use plain language to explain who will directly benefit and how from your project.



Project costs

Work out a breakdown of the costs and be realistic. People sometimes think that by asking for less they have a better chance of being successful. But, if the budget does not match the aims, it just looks like it's not costed properly. Equally, do not inflate the budget artificially. Experienced grant assessors can always spot over budgeting.

If your group does not have a financial officer or a dedicated treasurer, it may be a good idea to seek financial advice. Your figures and cost breakdowns must be accurate (e.g. if it is for larger sums over a period of two to three years it will have to account for inflation).

Monitoring & Evaluation

The funder will need to feel confident that your organisation can competently manage the project and the funds. You will have to prove this in your application or letter. One way of doing this is by setting up a clear monitoring and evaluation system.

Describe in detail how the project will be evaluated when it comes to an end. Some projects will be easier to evaluate than others. How will you show what you have accomplished? For example, if your goal is a renewed sense of well-being in a community, try using anecdotal evidence, such as case studies.

Exit strategy

Most funders will want to see a clear exit strategy as they will not want to continue funding you indefinitely and will want to know that you can survive once their funding has ended. State clearly what you will do once the initial project and funding comes to an end (i.e. will you look for funding elsewhere?).

Plan ahead!

Allow yourself plenty of time for writing a funding application. Make a note of the deadline for submissions and the 'turnaround time' as these can vary greatly between funders (e.g. monthly, twice yearly, etc.). If you are planning a big project and are applying for a larger sum of money, allow for 6-9 months.

Preparation Step 2:

Finding the right funders

Identifying the most appropriate funders for your organisation and project can be the most important stage in the application process. Thorough research at this point will avoid time wasted applying to funders who may not even have an interest in your project or area.

Match don't cram

There is no point trying to squeeze your project into a set of funding criteria that are not really appropriate. A good rule is to match your aspirations to the funders needs and funding priorities.

One or more?

You may decide to apply to one funder for the full amount or a few funders for different aspects of the project. Some funders don't like to be the sole funder on a project, while others do.

Bear in mind that you might not be successful, so it's important to have other potential funders to apply to.

Use the funding resources available to find funders to whom you are eligible to apply. There are websites (see *Further information and resources*) and specialist funding directories.

Note: Remember to make sure that you are reading up-to-date information, as funders can change and amend guidelines and objectives up to 3 times a year.

Follow the guidelines

Once you have found the funder you think you might apply to, read the guidelines more than once. Make sure you are eligible and meet all requirements (e.g. is your group organised in the right way? Can the funds be used for your project? Is there a list of exclusions? Do you have to be a registered charity?) It can be helpful if two people read the guidance notes, make notes on what they think the key elements are, and then compare these. This method will not only ensure that your organisation is eligible, but also keep the funder's objectives at the forefront of your mind.

Do not be afraid to contact funders to discuss their requirements or ask questions if you need to. This may be an especially good idea, if, for instance, you are concerned that a similar project may already be running, or you would like to discuss your project before spending time on the application process. If you do contact funders, always be professional and make sure you are well prepared.

You're ready for the application

Now that you're certain you can apply you can turn your attention to the funder's template application form or letter of application.

General rules to remember

- **avoid jargon** – Most applications are read by people who have no idea about your organisation so make it sound attractive but not convoluted. Use plain language and keep your answers concise and to the point. Never use acronyms and abbreviations.



- **do as you're told** – be sure to follow the instructions carefully and give them exactly what they want. If the form states that you should only type within the boxes or that they don't want faxed copies, do what they ask!
- **assume nothing** – assume that the funder has no prior knowledge of your group, organisation or local area. What may be obvious to you may not be obvious to the person assessing your application.
- **get it read** – get someone not associated with the project to read the application or letter when it's finished. This will give you a good idea of how it reads.
- **type** – do not hand write your applications, even if the rules allow it and you think your hand writing is very neat. It will always look more professional when typed neatly.
- **don't rush** – a successful funding application takes time and effort. Don't rush it. Make sure everything is exactly how you want it to be. If some of your answers look weak, or you need more statistical information, take the time to get it right as this will maximise your chance of success and save time in the long run.
- **documents** – send all supporting documentation required (if asked). Funding applications can be immediately rejected if supporting documents are missing or incomplete. If sending a copy of your annual accounts or your constitution make sure they are signed and dated. Most funders will ask for your most recent bank statement, and this must be the original. Always make sure to affix correct postage if you are posting the application.

Completing an application form

- **copy it** – make several copies of your application form, and use these to draft your answers. This way, the final version (always typed) will be perfect;
- **read the questions, twice!** – make sure you've read and understood all the questions. If you don't, ask the funder;
- **answer all questions asked** – never ever leave a blank question on the form. If a question does not apply to your organisation, write 'N/A';
- **use the funder's language** – use key 'buzzwords' from the guidelines in the application, where you can;
- **be positive** – use confident, active words like: 'increase', 'maximise', 'save', 'assist', 'decrease' and avoid using words like: 'would', 'could', 'should' and 'may';

- **keep focused** – stay focussed on your vision, aims and objectives and keep what you say clear, concise and convincing.

Writing a letter of application

Even when a funder has no standard application form and requests a letter of application, they will usually have guidelines you need to follow.

- never send a standard letter, always take the time to write a personal letter to each funder;
- find out who the correct contact is and address the letter accordingly;
- send your letter on headed paper, with details of the charity or company no. (if applicable);
- keep your letter short. It should never exceed 2 sides of A4;
- use factual information, and remember to back this up with statistics.

If the funder doesn't give you a guideline as to what to include in your letter, use the following list to help you:

- project title;
- introduction and brief history of your group or organisation;
- summary of the project proposal including cost;
- project description – including why it's important and how it will directly benefit users, how it will be run, how it will be monitored and evaluated, and the results you expect to achieve;
- a summary of other funders;
- be sure to finish the letter with contact information for them to contact you for more information.

Attach the following documents to your letter:

- project budget;
- governing document (e.g. your constitution);
- the most recent annual accounts (or projected accounts if you are a newly formed organisation).

Note: Some funders welcome additional information, like examples of past work (project DVDs, publications, etc.) This is worth finding out about.

In the end...

Make a copy of the final application form or letter for all funding applications. Not all funders send acknowledgements of receipt, so don't panic if you don't hear from them.

If you are successful, you can use this application as a reference when making future funding applications to similar funders. Remember to thank the funder and keep them informed of all progress.

Unsuccessful funding bids can be hard to accept and disappointing, especially after all of the work put

into the application process. If you are unsuccessful, do not hesitate to contact the funder for feedback to set your mind at rest and to help you with your next application. You could learn valuable lessons. Sometimes, however, it is simply a case of too little money and too many applications.

Further information & resources

Funding directories

Voluntary Arts England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales' websites all have detailed funding sections with nation specific information.

- www.voluntaryarts.org/funding
- www.vascotland.org.uk/funding
- www.vaireland.org/funding
- www.vaw.org.uk/funding
- www.vaengland.org.uk/funding

The Directory of Social Change produces a wide range of fundraising guides. You can browse and order online at:

www.dsc.org.uk/acatalog/Fundraising.html

Websites

- www.funderfinder.org.uk
- www.access-funds.co.uk
- www.governmentfunding.org.uk
- www.cibfunding.org.uk
- www.acf.org.uk/linkstrust.htm
- www.fundraising.co.uk
- www.trustfunding.org.uk

England

'Arts Funding Guide' – The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has published a Guide to Arts Funding in England.

www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/archive_2003/arts_funding_guide The Guide covers: Government funding, Arts Council England, National Lottery, Sponsorship, Trusts and Foundations, International Funds. There is also a section of Useful Contacts and Publications, which includes funding websites.

Republic of Ireland

'Irish Fundraising Handbook' 5th edition 2003-04. Directory and guide to fundraising for non-profit work in the Republic of Ireland published by CAFE publications/Clann Credo. A link to the handbook can be found:

<http://www.cidb.ie/comhairleVCS.nsf/HTMLPages/Funding?Opendocument>

Northern Ireland

Grant-Tracker is an initiative of the NICVA and available by subscription. However there is a wide range of fundraising resources you can access and download from the site free of charge. The website is www.grant-tracker.org Open programmes are often listed on www.communityni.org (portal to the voluntary and community sector, also from NICVA). This has an Arts, Media, Culture and Heritage section.

Scotland

- The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) E: info@oscr.org.uk W: www.oscr.org.uk
- A guide to enable voluntary organisations to know how they might apply to the Scottish Executive for funding: www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/social/gtvg-00.asp

Wales

- Heritage Lottery Fund
Suits 5A, Hodge House
Guildhall Place, St Mary's Street
Cardiff
CF10 1DY
T: **029 2023 4151**
- James Pantyfedwen Foundation Grants and Loans
Richard Morgan, Executive Secretary
Pantyfedwen, 9 Market Street,
Aberystwyth, Ceredigion
SY23 1DL
T: **01970 612 806**

Disclaimer: We have taken reasonable precautions to ensure that the information contained in this Briefing is accurate. However, the document is not intended to be legally comprehensive. We recommend you take legal advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

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